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All-in wrestling in inter-war Britain: science and spectacle in Mass Observation's 'Worktown'

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The All-In style of wrestling emerged as a spectator sport in the period between the two world wars. Originating in America it became established in Britain where it appealed primarily to a working class audience. The excessive violence of All-In was controversial and its blend of the spectacular and the dramatic with sport led to accusations that it was not really a sport. Nevertheless it retained many characteristics of sport and audiences consumed it as such. All-In wrestling evolved from a traditional ancient sport to a commercial entertainment and represents an extreme example of the conflation of sport and drama. Using records of the consumption of professional all-in wrestling in the Mass Observation Archive this paper suggests an explanation of the ways in which audiences negotiated the tensions between sport and spectacle.

Keywords mimesis spectacle spectators Mass Observation

Introduction

The all-in style of wrestling was invented in the nineteen-thirties and continues to be consumed as a sporting spectacle by a global audience in the twenty first century[1]. All-in was a blend of the Lancashire Catch as Catch Can and Graeco-Roman styles of wrestling with Judo. Its appeal derived from the use of holds and locks barred in other styles, which made it a physically violent yet engrossing spectator sport which gained popularity through the deployment of new commercial techniques of promotion and presentation. All-in wrestling has featured little in the historiography of sport in Britain where its status as a sport has often been questioned. It has tended to prioritise the spectacular and the theatrical and to display a purposeful transgression of normative values of sport such as fair play, non-determined outcomes and respect for the authority of the referee. At least one standard history of wrestling ignored it while another source queried if All- in could actually be called wrestling[2]. The style was subject to a critical gaze from the beginning; as early as 1931 the *Times*, reporting on a promotional exhibition match of all-in wrestling, predicted that if all the holds and tricks on display were to be used, the English would not tolerate a sport which was just as brutal as the old knuckle prize-fighting and should be as illegal"[3]. However all-in quickly became established as a popular spectator sport and after the Second World War was presented in civic venues and commercial stadia throughout Britain, eventually becoming a weekly feature on national television in the nineteen-fifties. All-in wrestling never gained public acceptance as a sport in the same sense as football or cricket and was normally not reported in national newspapers because of its suspected inauthenticity and gimmickry[4]. Nevertheless, in the inter-war years it gained a large body of

enthusiasts who considered it to be a sport and consumed it as such. This paradox raises questions concerning the production, consumption and meaning of sport in late modernity and the impact of commercialism on sport in mid-twentieth century Britain.

This paper reviews the historical development of wrestling in Great Britain through the evolution of traditional styles into commercially profitable forms of sport-based entertainment. It posits an ontological change in wrestling in the nineteenth century from a sport to a theatrical entertainment and explores the development and appeal of the All-In style as an amorphous blend of competitive sport and dramatic spectacle. Finally it analyses the ways in which audiences negotiated All-In's inherent tensions of sporting ideals and violent theatrical excess, drawing from the attitudes and opinions of spectators documented in Mass Observation's study of all-in wrestling in the late nineteen-thirties.

Historical Overview of Wrestling

Wrestling, as Mike Huggins[5] has observed, has a considerable capacity for re-invention. It is an ancient sport, found in Egyptian, Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations and then becoming geographically widespread throughout history, notably in Great Britain, Scandinavia, Russia, the United States of America and Japan[6]. It was included in the ancient Olympic Games from 704 BC and was later adapted by the Romans in the classical Graeco-Roman style. In England there are written accounts of wrestling from the twelfth century and it was part of the spectrum of leisure activities associated with traditional feasts and revelries[7]. King Henry VIII included wrestling in the entertainments at the Field of Cloth of Gold in 1520 when the English Royal Guard fought the Bretons[8] and wrestling also featured in the Cotswold Games at Chipping Campden in the seventeenth century[9]. In the early nineteenth century wrestling was found in prize competitions at fairs; a rural sports event held at Windsor to celebrate the King's birthday in 1831, for example, offered a purse of ten shillings in an open contest[10]. Although wrestling was taught to young noble men, it never became a "knightly" game and by the early nineteenth century was essentially a sport of the lower social classes, characterised by prize fighting[11]. Although both the Graeco-Roman and freestyle forms have been recognised sports throughout the period of the modern Olympics, the all-in style was developed primarily as a form of commercial entertainment which blended a sport-based contest with the production of a dramatic spectacle.

As with many martial sports, wrestling has historically been characterised by national variants and within individual countries stylistic differences have proliferated. In Britain two distinct versions of wrestling evolved, the Cumberland and Westmorland style, and the Cornwall and Devon style, each with its own rules, though Graeco-Roman and, from the early nineteenth century the Lancashire Catch as Catch Can style were also practised[12] . The latter evolved into freestyle wrestling in which any fair hold, trip or throw was allowed within the international rules, enabling it to become the most popular and "probably the most entertaining" form of the sport[13]. As with boxing, the popularity of

wrestling depended in large part upon the availability of prize money for contestants, the appeal to spectators of its controlled violence and the facility it offered for gambling. Furthermore, the illegality of prize-fighting because of the danger of fatality, and the not infrequent prosecution of promoters, fighters and spectators for riotous and unlawful assembly made wrestling a less dangerous but equally entertaining and legal spectator sport[14]. In the eighteen twenties the Eagle Tavern in the City Road, London, was a popular venue at which bouts between wrestlers from Devon and Cornwall and also between Devon and Irish challengers attracted large crowds of paying spectators[15]. Unlike bare knuckle prize-fighting, which declined through a waning respect for the Broughton rules[16] the Cumberland and Westmorland style was from 1809 regulated through the rules of the Carlisle Wrestling Society[17]. A meeting of the Cumberland and Westmoreland Club at the Copenhagen House Tavern in Islington in 1850 attracted over three thousand spectators and was reported not only to be free from the grossness and brutality of the wrestling of other counties but to have displayed a degree of respectable patronage and cordiality[18]. The Cumberland and Westmorland Society also sponsored wrestling matches in provincial areas for example the annual Whit Monday event in Liverpool which drew wrestlers from Carlisle, Kendal and Maryport and also from Crewe, Blackburn and Liverpool itself [19]. Wrestling thus appears to have flourished in the early nineteenth century as a traditional sport, regulated by rules and offering spectators opportunities to gamble.

The shift to entertainment

Industrialisation and the advance of modernity created a new commercial market for urban sport. Requiring little space and being suited to indoor venues, wrestling readily supplied this market and was transformed from a traditional country sport to a theatrical spectacle. In the second half of the nineteenth century wrestling became reconfigured within what Peter Bailey [20] has identified as a modern entertainment industry, presented to a paying public in large venues of theatres and music halls. A major aspect of the commercial potential of wrestling lay in its dramatic performance of symbolic roles; at the Strand Theatre in August 1868, for example, a Burlesque Extravaganza of the Field of the Cloth of Gold by William Brough included a dramatization of wrestling[21] while a performance of Talfourd's Electra Orestes featured a young woman wrestling which was highly praised by the press [22]. In the final third of the nineteenth century the theatre audience for wrestling was consolidated by William Holland, a 'showman and music hall and theatre entrepreneur'[23]. Holland, a "man of brilliant ideas in catering for the public entertainment" [24], reinvented wrestling as a variety act in a wider programme of musical acts, donkey races, comedy and gymnastics. In January 1870 a show at the cavernous Agricultural Hall in London included an international match between England and France in which English wrestlers fought French *lutteurs* in both the French and Cumberland styles, with each team winning under its respective rules [25]. This match attracted a crowd of "thousands" [26] and was, in the view of the *Derby Mercury* [27] an example of putting muscular Christianity to good use in providing an "amusing and beneficent" form of leisure. Holland later presented a return fixture in the Catch As Catch Can style[28]. As demand for wrestling increased, other international wrestling matches were staged, for example between England and America in both London[29] and Liverpool and in 1891 the *Glasgow Herald* concluded that wrestling appealed to both

the sightseeing public and the sporting community[30]. Wrestling attracted both male and female spectators [31] and by the early twentieth century an audience for a form of wrestling which blended sport with dramatic entertainment had emerged, establishing a commercial basis for the introduction of all-in wrestling after the First World War.

The shift from a traditional sport form regulated by the rules of the regional styles to a profit-driven commercial entertainment was resented by the governing bodies of wrestling. In 1870 the Cumberland and Westmorland Wrestling Society lamented the fact that in Liverpool the sport had degenerated into speculation and profiteering and established a committee dedicated to the rescue of the old 'north countrie' pastime from the disreputable position into which it had fallen [32]. The growth of popularity in the late nineteenth century of the Catch as Catch Can style further shifted the control of wrestling from governing bodies to commercial promoters of entertainment [33]. In the early twentieth century wrestling benefited from the music hall vogue for "Strong Men" as George Hackenschmidt, an Estonian wrestler, elided physique with performance by appearing both as a "strong man" and a wrestler. Hackenschmidt, was introduced to London by the theatrical producer C.B. Cochran who became his manager and is credited with creating the music-hall wrestling boom of the Edwardian era[34]. Cochran presented wrestling as a theatrical entertainment rather than a sport and established the template upon which all-in wrestling was based, using Hackenschmidt as his principal attraction. Matches had to be of a reasonable duration and had to excite the crowd; Cochran thus hired other wrestlers to play the part of villain and to foul Hackenschmidt repeatedly before allowing themselves to be defeated. Other theatrical devices included the abuse of the crowd by the villain and the throwing of the referee into the orchestra pit. International wrestling tournaments were widely presented in theatres and music halls, sensationally dramatized but retaining an underlying theme of physical violence and aggression; when Hackenschmidt defeated Tom Jenkins, the American champion at the Albert Music Hall in 1904 the crowd encouraged him to break Jenkins' bones [35]. Beyond the confines of the music hall the Catch-As-Catch-Can style, emerged as a popular local style in Lancashire, predominantly around the Wigan coalfield, where miners wrestled for money and bets. This was a rough and violent style; according to one contemporary witness 'such little details as the breaking of fingers would not be considered a disqualification if such an accident took place solely in the struggle' [36].The Catch-As-Catch-Can style was taken to America by migrants and became established with international matches attracting large crowds and, while retaining a core element of sporting idealism, wrestling also enjoyed popularity as a form of entertainment [37].

All- In Wrestling

All-in wrestling evolved in America in response to a post-war commercial decline in wrestling. In 1925 the CACC style was adapted by the American wrestler Frank Gotch to include Japanese submission locks in an attempt to re-popularise wrestling [38]. It also employed a range of gimmicks which included the use of masked wrestlers and contestants emptying buckets of water over each other, tying each other up in the ropes and throwing the referee out of the ring[39]. The process through which all-in wrestling was introduced to Britain remains unclear. A principal source is Atholl Oakeley and as a world champion professional all-in wrestler of the inter-war decades he remains an important

contemporary witness[40]. Oakeley claimed to have introduced all-in wrestling to Britain with Henri Irslinger in 1930 under the "New Rules of American Catch As Catch Can wrestling (nicknamed All-In)"[41]. With Irslinger, a former world champion wrestler, Oakeley established the British Wrestling Association (BWA) to control all-in wrestling in Britain and obliged all wrestlers to be licensed by it. An important change from the Catch as Catch can style, was the introduction of a submission fall in which a wrestler could, through applying a lock to his opponent, inflict pain to the extent that he was forced to submit. Contests were divided into three minute rounds and matches decided on the best two out of three falls or a knock-out. Fouls included kneeing in the stomach, finger-wrenching, striking the referee and throwing the opponent out of the ring, though as we shall see, these moves were highly popular with audiences and appear to have been committed with impunity.

Having gained control of all-in wrestling in Britain by requiring all promoters, masters of ceremony, referees and contestants to be licensed by the BWA, Oakeley and Irslinger promoted the new style to the public. Audiences had previously been introduced to all-in wrestling in the late nineteen twenties through cinema news reels and the first live bouts were fought in front of full houses on 15th December 1930 between Irslinger and George Modrich at Olympia in London and between Oakeley and Bert Assirati at Belle Vue Manchester [42]. Although these demonstration matches were not, in the view of the *Times* [43] "proper" wrestling, English audiences were drawn to all-in wrestling in large numbers. The popularisation of all-in owed much to Harold Lane's regular matches at the London Club in Baker Street. Oakeley recalled Lane as a "grand showman" quoting him as having seen in all-in wrestling "the very thing we have been looking for…. We have not been doing too well recently and London needs a sporting shake-up' [44]. All-in wrestling raised controversy from the start. In October 1931 Oakeley fought Francois Berthod, the heavyweight champion of France at the London Club. Oakeley won in the fifth round but only through a significant flouting of the rules by giving a "very hard punch to the body which some of the spectators thought was low". Towards the end of the evening the sport turned into comic entertainment as:

> "a gentleman got into the ring while a bout was in progress and stopped it. He had arranged at some expense a cabaret show, and a good one; and if this wrestling went on any longer – it was then about 11.30 – the show would be ruined. The spectators were quite good-humoured about it which seems to prove that all-in wrestling is more of a joke and a spectacle than a serious business" [45].

By the autumn of 1931 all-in wrestling was attracting large crowds In London, particularly through matches between Irslinger and Berthod and between Oakeley and King Curtis [46]. Its residual elements of music hall theatricality and exoticism; for example, before the first round of a match against Atholl Oakeley at the London Sports Club in October 1931 Jim Wango, a Senegalese wrestler known as the Black Devil, "slapped his thighs savagely and sprang up and down a few times", looking a "most ferocious person" and making wild and weird noises [47]. The boundary between sport and entertainment was indeterminate to spectators but to the *Times* [48], describing a performance of wrestling at the London Victoria Palace, sport had succumbed to music hall acrobatics:

> "All in wrestling is, after all, only a variation of acrobatics, and acrobatics especially of the transatlantic type, are the staple diet of the music hall today. Let us admit then that these champions (and there are a vast number of them) have properly heroic names – Atholl Oakeley and the Black Devil, for instance, might have walked straight out of the pages of romantic fiction – but their wrestling is too lacking in the graces and too redolent of what looks like, but probably in reality is not, crude brutality to be included in the catalogue of heroic sports."

Outside London all-in wrestling thrived, particularly in the north of England, as Irslinger negotiated BWA contracts with the managers of halls and stadiums. The Liverpool Stadium and Belle Vue in Manchester became major venues – the latter claimed by Oakeley to be 'Europe's greatest and best known wrestling stadium' - and all-in was also staged in Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, Hull, Blackpool, Leicester, Newcastle and Nottingham[49]. It appealed to crowds which enjoyed the raw aggression and violence of the type described by Oakeley in an account of his own fight with Bulldog Garnon at the London Club:

> "It was without doubt just about the bloodiest fight since the days of the prize ring. In the second round Garnon blacked my eye with a right hook to which I took exception and retaliated by a knuckle-screw headlock which tore his ear. As a result everything and everybody within reach, including the referee Fred Davis and myself, were smothered in blood. In All-In wrestling it was not done to fall down on the floor of the ring screaming 'Foul' every time anyone got hurt. Nor were fights stopped because of blood. In fact at Newcastle if the fights did not get rough the fans used to chant 'We want blood, We want blood'" [50].

In 1932 Oakeley heightened the level of showmanship of all-in wrestling through advising the wrestler Norman Ansell to follow the example of foreign wrestlers by assuming a persona, wearing a tallow dressing gown with a skull and crossbones and yellow pants and re-naming himself Norman the Butcher. This gave impetus to the emergence of a new type of suggestively named wrestlers such as Aussie the Butcher, 'Hard-boiled' Herbie Rosenberg, 'Gentleman' Jim, 'Black Butcher' Johnson and Jack Pye, a former miner from Doncaster. Wrestlers could now, as Oakeley observed, be regarded as villains by the people who came to watch and All-in became rougher, more disregarding of rules, more violent and more popular[51] . Fighting Angus McShane at the Pool (Tote) Club (the renamed London Sports Club) in 1932 Norman the Butcher gave a controversial display of the new all-in style, fighting roughly and by the discretion of the referee remaining in the ring when he should have been disqualified on several grounds [52]. The apparent reluctance of referees to apply the rules may have diminished the claim of all-in wrestling to be a sport but increased the excitement of the crowds and attendances at other London venues, including The Ring at Blackfriars, remained high throughout the summer of 1932 when other indoor sport was usually suspended. Jack Pye, a major personality of inter-war all-in wrestling, became notorious for his rugged and uncompromising approach, in one match continuing to fight outside the ring, for which he should have been disqualified, but allowed to continue by the referee. Although the *Times* [53] suggested that a better

enforcement of the rules would enhance the popularity of all-in wrestling, the fact was that such transgression was a major aspect of its appeal. A fight between Norman the Butcher and Jack Pye, for example, involved Pye throwing Norman out of the ring, twisting his nose, hitting the referee and "finishing him off" with "what appeared to be a right hook to the jaw" [54]. Further notoriety accrued to all-in wrestling through the death of Strangler Johnson following an all-in bout at Sheffield in March 1933. Witnesses reported this to have been a savage and brutal match and the coroner's jury, categorising all-in as "not a clean sport", called for its prohibition [55]. Further iniquity was inflicted through a series of mainly unsuccessful attempts to ban wrestling on Sundays under the Lords Day Observance Act of 1781 and, in the case of the Barn Club in Barnet in 1937, prosecution for after-hours drinking and gambling associated with all-in wrestling [56]. Other cases involved further fatalities and prosecutions of wrestlers who had inflicted violence on referees after matches.

Despite its transgressions of sporting values and its associations with criminality and savagery, all-in wrestling enjoyed great popularity in Britain in the nineteen thirties. Its use of role play in which wrestlers pitted good against evil and heroes against villains together with its disregard for the authority of the referee delivered exciting and spectacular performances. The use of science and technique against brute strength, the requirement for successful wrestlers to absorb extensive physical punishment and even the use of tickling as a method of fighting appeared to contribute to rather than detract from its appeal. There were also suspicions that many matches were faked and as Harrison suggested, if all holds and locks allowed in All-In were used, the victim would "not skip off the mat but would be taken to hospital" [57]. The fluid interchange of sport and drama and the widely held suspicion that at least some all-in wrestling bouts involved fakery, raises questions not only about its authenticity as a sport but also about the spectators who were obliged to reconcile the seemingly incompatible notions of theatrical excess and sporting idealism represented by all-in wrestling. Some insight to these questions can be gained through Mass Observation's study of all-in wrestling in Bolton in 1937-38.

Mass Observation and All-in Wrestling at the Worktown Stadium

Mass Observation was established in 1937 to undertake an investigation of everyday life in Britain. Tom Harrisson, an anthropologist and one of its co-founders, had previously travelled to Bolton, an industrial town in Lancashire, with the intention of studying the northern English working class and subsequently Mass Observation chose Bolton, which it referred to as 'Worktown' as the locus of a larger project to explore working class culture and everyday life. A permanent team of professional observers lived in the town between 1937 and 1939 and were assisted by local volunteers. Mass Observation was interested in the consumption of sport and the files on the Worktown. Stadium, offer a unique insight to all-in wrestling in the late nineteen-thirties. These files constitute a unique archive of the everyday consumption of all-in wrestling and comprise reports by professional mass observers and written correspondence from spectators. The records also include the reports

of observers, photographs of all-in wrestling by Humphrey Spender and the responses to a prize competition in the autumn of 1938 which invited members of the public to tell Mass Observation what they liked, or didn't like, about all-in wrestling. A number of respondents were later asked to reply to a survey which sought to establish frequency of attendance and the most interesting aspects of all-in wrestling. The sample was not representative - several respondents had never attended a wrestling match – but the opinions expressed give insight to the consumption of all-in wrestling as a sport in inter-war Britain that is not available in any other archive. They suggest that audiences were neither passive nor homogeneous in their reception of all-in wrestling and that they played an active role in its production. Many social interpretations of sport deploy 'grand narrative' theories to explain its development and meaning at the macro level. Such approaches cannot interrogate the experience of the everyday consumption of sport. In the micro-history of everyday life, however, the individual spectator becomes an historical figure with agency, a subject rather than an object of history[58]. In the history of the everyday, the archive facilitates a reconstruction of the vision and experiences of those who were its subjects and illuminate their everyday lives[59]. Mass Observation's documentation of all-in wrestling in Bolton thus allows access to the individual spectator as well as the collective of the crowd and gives insight to the motivations and preferences of spectators and to the production of that aspect of social life represented by the weekly wrestling programme at the Worktown stadium [60].

All-in wrestling venues were geographically distributed throughout Great Britain and were particularly well represented in Lancashire where Catch As Catch Can had been popular since the late nineteenth century. Venues such as Belle Vue and the Liverpool Stadium, were located in working-class districts; the Ardwick Stadium in Manchester, known locally as the "Blood Tub", smelled of sweat, liniment and tobacco smoke, housed a ring permanently stained with blood and most of its ringside sets had been damaged by wrestlers who had been thrown over the ropes[61]. In Bolton all-in wrestling was presented on Monday evenings once a week in summer and twice in winter at the Bolton Stadium, a converted old mill. The Stadium was opened as a speculative commercial venture in 1933 by an ex-amateur wrestler in the hope of emulating the financial success of all-in in America. In addition to the presentation of wrestling matches the Stadium organised a social club which met on Sunday nights when women and mud wrestlers performed [62]. The cheapest admission to the wrestling was sixpence to the standing section known as "the tanners"; middle prices provided seating on benches or chairs with ringside seats costing two shillings and sixpence. The relatively low cost of watching all-in wrestling was commented upon by several respondents. Mass Observation described the venue as one of "shabby elegance" with an aspect of disrepair:

> The hall is of rectangular shape, each sidewall divided into section by buttresses. Between the buttresses the wall had at sometime been whitewashed and now has

> a yellow dirty colour with pieces flaked off. The windows are curtained by red blue creped paper rather worn and bleached by incoming rain. The wall four feet from the ground is painted red with a green band around the top. To the centre is the ring. Around it is the 2/6 and 2/- seats red plush with lots of wholes [sic] in it and evidently originating from very different sources. Then come the 1/- seats with plain chairs with red crepe coating and 5 feet away separated by a 4 feet high fence then 6d stands the whole audience room slightly sloped [63].

Humphrey Spender's photograph of the stadium portrays a darkened hall in which the focus of attention is the ring, illuminated by the flood of a vertical light which contributed to the creation of a spectacle, recalling Barthes observation of wrestling in 'squalid Parisian halls' [64]. The crowd was mainly though not exclusively male and working class and included both adults and boys. All the respondents to Mass Observation's survey who stated their occupation held manual and in the main unskilled jobs and included storekeepers, labourers, foundry workers or were unemployed; Mass Observation claimed, without suggesting any generalization, that the crowd also included a policeman, a coroner's officer and a catholic priest. Like the music hall audiences of the previous century, the all-in wrestling crowd saw the event as a space for its own "demonstrative involvement" and spectators were simultaneously performers, producing a 'chemistry of artist and audience'[65]. The crowd was itself part of the attraction; a female spectator commented on how the audience's "noises" formed part of the entertainment of the evening." The crowd was not passive and, like the cinema audience in neighbouring Salford described in Greenwood's contemporaneous novel *Love on the Dole* [66], was an active agent in the production of its leisure. It was therefore essential to ensure that a wrestling programme provided opportunities for spectators to identify with a wrestler; as a Worktown promoter informed Mass Observation:

> To be a successful wrestler the man must be clever. It is not enough that he is master of the science of wrestling, he has to be clever too….The crowd is really tricky, first thing to give them is a favourite, so long as they can cheer him and boo the opponent everything is alright and they enjoy themselves thoroughly [67].

Influence on the crowd's choice of favourite was exercised through the pre-match presentation of the wrestlers in the ring as names clothing and physical attributes signified the *dramatis personae* of the performance:

> They all wear dressing gowns the less famous and poorer simple woollen ones, the more famous fighter's silk dressing gown with the symbol of their name. After being introduced by the promoter they present themselves to the crowd by circling twice round in trotting steps holding his hand clasped over their

> heads. And when wild Tarzan does it the audience gets certainly the impression this is a strong wild animal but certainly beautiful in its strength [68].

Commercial success depended on the ability of the promoter to engage the crowd by presenting wrestling which would hold an appeal. This involved not only the presentation of a show but also the facility for partisanship amongst the spectators. This could occur through identification with heroic virtue or simply the physical appearance of the wrestlers:

> After the interval the first fight was between Rough House Baker the notorious Mat Mauler who does not know the word fear v. Ross McNeil the Pitman Hercules. Hercules was very well built but less heavy than Rough House who was extremely ugly. Immediately the crowd took to Hercules and booed Rough House for whatever he did. As a matter of fact the crowd was most unfair as Rough House fighted [sic] very properly and was definitely the better fighter though Hercules was also good. What the reason was for the attitude of the crowd whether they preferred Hercules because he was extremely well built or because he was the weaker one I could not find out. [69]

An all-in wrestling match comprised two categories of fighting, referred to by spectators as clean wrestling and 'dirty', or 'rough' wrestling. The former was predicated on technique and skill and retained an inherent strain of conventional sporting values; the latter was sensationalised, theatrical and subverted consensual notions of fair play and respect for authority. The distinction between them was succinctly articulated by a female respondent to Mass Observation's survey:

> Clean wrestling is interesting, rough stuff is exciting. If we get a bit of both it is good entertainment[70].

While most respondents stated a preference for clean wrestling, "considered as the "titbit of the evening by those who like clean good wrestling and plenty of action" [71] - the inclusion of rough wrestling remained essential to the appeal of a wrestling programme. 'Clean' wrestling was aggressive but not transgressive and adhered to normative sport values such as a general observance of the rules and respect for the authority of the referee. Respondents distinguished clean wrestling as "scientific" and preferable to rough wrestling, an "exhibition of crazy fools". Wrestlers categorised by spectators as clean, such as the conventionally named Billy Riley, Lew Faulkner and George Gregory, could be relied upon to present a hard but fair fight. Spectators liked to see science overcome brute strength and some hoped to learn techniques that might be useful in self-defence. Clean wrestling embodied "manly fair play" and respect for the referee:

> "I like to see the manly spirit displayed by the contestants, particularly the spirit in which the defeated acknowledges the supremacy of the victor and is

> ready to shake his hand in true friendship. This is a virtue worthy of emulation amongst all contestants [72].

Barthes [73] observed the key to a wrestling contest to reside in the body of the wrestler and in Worktown 'clean' equated to the maintenance of a healthy masculine body, reflecting the contemporaneous interest in physical culture. Spectators admired the developed physique of the clean wrestler as a "well-developed specimen of manhood" and a "real man" who was contrasted not only with the dirty and sometimes masked wrestler but also with the Worktown male and the "spineless and insipid men one meets ordinarily".

In contrast to clean wrestling, dirty wrestling entailed a transgression of the rules and an overt disregard for the authority of the referee. It represented a dramatic performance of symbolic roles; to use Barthes[74] expression it was "pure gesture", separating good from evil and unveiling a form of justice. The appeal of rough wrestling lay not in an intellectual appreciation of the application of science and technique but in the raw emotion of the wrestlers' performance – the 'real' entertainment began when the wrestlers 'got mad'. For some respondents rough or dirty wrestling captured essence of the all-in style:

> 'I like to see action. Plenty of rough play in the ring such as throwing out the referee, having the seconds trying to part the wrestlers. I like occasionally to see a foul as in most cases it is the only way to start action. Without plenty of rough play there would be no such thing as All-in'[75].

> ….They want a dirty wrestler and though they shout 'foul' and boo a lot it is dirty wrestling which gives them a thrill, makes the excitement and brings them back" [76].

Rough wrestling presented a spectacular transgression of normative sporting values. Its symbolic conflict between good and evil in the role-play of the wrestlers and the negation of authority expressed by the throwing of either an opponent or the referee out of the ring was a common feature. These characteristics can be seen in the account of a match between Harry Pye (Doncaster) and Harry Brookes (London) recorded by Mass Observation:

> Pye opened the second round in a most unexpected manner. Without waiting for the gong he rushed Brookes' corner, grabbed him by the hair and kneed him fiercely three times in quick succession in the lower part of the groin; Brookes screams in agony, doubles up holding his pelvis (TESTICLES). Pye grabs him and lifts Brookes overhead, Jock the Ref springs on Pye's back, pulling his head backwards, tearing at his hair but no overall success so over the ropes and into the ringside seats goes Brookes, there is another quick scuffle by the ringside spectators for Jock is thrown over too – Pye runs round ring beating his chest – meanwhile the din is terrific – crowd shouting "Dirty Rat" , swine, bastard, lousy

> pig, then missiles hurtle through the air – lighted cigarettes, a key, a piece of Billiard chalk and I had to dodge a small iron bolt thrown at Pye from the other side of the ring. Pye won't let Brookes or Ref. get back in the ring, spectators shaking their fists at him. The Hall is an uproar, even I was getting a little excited; Brookes manages to get back but Pye seizes him by the head – and forces him on the ropes, gouges his eyes, then knees him again. Brookes drops on the canvas, close to me. He is a pitiable object, eyes almost shut, doubled up, holding testicles shouting "he has hurt me". Bell goes but Pye rushes at Brookes and lands several kicks in Brookes; stomach. Pye's second runs to him and just manages to get him to corner, Referee picks up stool and challenges Pye – a comical sight – Jock 8 stone and Pye 17 stone [77].

The transgressive nature of the encounter continued in the next round, increasing the emotional involvement of the crowd who, seeing Brookes to be wronged, support him and direct their hatred towards the perpetrator:

> Pye again beats gong, rushes at Brookes, puts Brookes head over top rope and then lifts middle rope over back of his neck. Brookes cannot get loose and seems to be choking. The scene is indescribable – the crowd are on their feet yelling and waving their hands – the ref helped by both seconds manages to extricate Brookes. Pye grabs him, a quick aeroplane spin – body slams and pins him for the count of three. Boos and Boos and one or two cheering. 1st fall to Pye in 2 minutes of the 3rd round. Brookes can scarcely rise.[78]

Brookes then recovered and although breaking the rules, as had Pye, nevertheless retained the support of the crowd:

> In next round ref attacks Pye with a stool, Pye chases Brookes, Brookes picks up water bowl and with a terrific bang lands it on Pye's head. Brookes pins Pye and wins 2nd fall of contest. (Observer says this was not really a fall but a faked one). Positions are reversed, Pye complains a spectator has burned him with a cigarette – observer claims to be able to see a burn mark – Brookes applies Indian deadlock to Pye who is so weakened he tries to get a spectator to pull him out of the ring. Brookes drags him back in and the crowd are happy. Brookes gets Pye in a deathlock and Pye submits. Brookes the winner goes to shake hands with Pye who refuses and tries to hit Brookes. Brookes kicks him 4 times in his weakened leg. The crowd cheers. At some point a young woman shouts "tear his bloody arm off". "Pye limps across the ring and threatens the man in the crowd who has burned him. All one section raise their fists – but a few cheer him but are hushed. At last both men are coaxed to dressing tent.[79]

The performance and the reaction of the crowd correspond with Barthes' analysis as Pye – now clearly identified by the crowd as the 'bastard' - complains to the referee whose authority he has previously refused to recognise in throwing him out of the ring and then enrages the crowd by trying to hit Brookes when invited to shake hands by him.

Discussion

The trajectory of all-in wrestling in the nineteen thirties provides insight to the production, consumption and meaning of sport in inter-war Britain. All-in wrestling falls in to the category of dissident "outsider" sports such greyhound racing and speedway[80]. It was genuinely proletarian in that both performers and spectators were drawn from the working-classes (Atholl Oakeley's idiosyncratic involvement made it no less so), and it remained virtually unknown not only to middle class people but to many working-class people too. The suspected rigging of fights for greater sensationalism, the spatial location of venues in poor districts, unsuccessful attempts to ban Sunday performances in London under the Lords Day Observance Act combined to ensure that all-in wrestling remained firmly beyond the bounds of respectability. Although rooted in vernacular traditions of sport and the music-hall, All-in was, like the greyhounds, ice hockey and speedway, an imported sport. Nevertheless, in spite of questions about the authenticity of all-in-wrestling as a conventional sport[81], it cannot easily be dismissed as a non-sport. It was presented as a sport and, importantly, was understood as a sport by spectators. Rather than disregard, all-in wrestling merits attention for its insight to the fluidity of the meaning of sport and the ways in which spectators negotiated their enjoyment of all-in wrestling within a discourse of clean and dirty wrestling.

Spectator sport, as Caillois [82] suggests, is mimetic in that it is a representation of the real world and thus its meaning lies not within itself but is drawn from its socio-cultural environment; it is a cultural space in which real-world struggles and emotions are played out. Mimesis - the representation or imitation of the real world - is often associated with theatre and like drama, sport demands a hero whose fortunes can change for better or worse and spectators may choose with whom to identify; sport thus imitates life [83]. Caillois argues that in spectator sport it is not the athletes who mimic but the spectators through their identification with the play and vicissitudes of the sport performer. He cites wrestling as a prime example of mimesis as the spectator must lend himself to the illusions which he is asked to believe – for example apparently non-harmful excessive violent play, theatrical costumes and orchestrated procedures - as more real than reality itself. Atkinson[84] extends this argument in suggesting that extreme forms of wrestling based on heightened violence and sensationalism constitute a 'double mimetic' or a second level or pretence. This

suggests a perspective through which 'dirty' all-in wrestling can be understood as a performance within a performance, a mock sport in contrast to the 'clean' sport of all-in wrestling. In challenging the conventional ritual and sporting orthodoxy of clean wrestling, dirty wrestling became a negation and denial of sport and also of the normative social values represented by clean wrestling.

Spectators' attitudes to clean and dirty wrestling differed markedly and the responses to Mass Observation's survey reflect a mutually exclusive relationship between them. The understanding of clean wrestling was, as we have seen, predicated upon its application of science and technique and its appeal to the intellect. Dirty wrestling on the other hand was predicated upon its negation of the values represented by clean wrestling and could be conceptualised only upon this difference. While both categories intentionally resembled sport and depended upon physical violence for their appeal, dirty wrestling transgressed and subverted the normative values represented by clean wrestling and appealed primarily to the emotions rather than the intellect. This differentiation was reflected in the reception and behaviour of spectators.

When the conventions of sport are negated, athletic performance becomes corrupted and a game changes from being a sport to a spectacle [85]. Barthes [86] famously declared wrestling to be a spectacle and spectators at the Worktown Stadium also used this word; dirty all-in wrestling was a "thrilling" spectacle in which wrestlers played to the gallery 'by aiming for the spectacular'. Dirty wrestling engendered transgressive behaviour in the crowd, particularly at moments of climax when it provoked disorderly behaviour, intended and actual acts of violence against the wrestlers, open expressions of hatred, joy in the wrestlers' mockery of the authority and status of the rules and the throwing of the referee out of the ring – a highly symbolic and subversive move. The all-in crowd's behaviour reflected Le Bon's assertion that the psychological crowd - one assembled with a determined objective and a disappearance of conscious personality – prefers illusions to truths and is deeply susceptible to the theatrical representations of the spectacle [87]. Recent work [88] on the heuristic value of Bhaktin's theory of the carnivalesque to transgressive leisure behaviour prompts the suggestion that dirty all-in wrestling provided a cathartic but temporary experience of transgression. While all-in wrestling cannot be fully equated to the carnival, dirty wrestling, which was in itself a transgression of sport, provoked a similar type of behaviour in the crowd. It enabled and gave sanction to actions and responses which represented a temporary inversion not only of normative behaviour but also of the notions of fair play shared by the civilised sport crowd. The crowd's seemingly out-of control behaviour mirrored the amoral and lawless nature of the spectacle before it but reverted to a socially normal pattern when the programme returned to clean wrestling.

Conclusion

The historical development of wrestling in Britain followed a recognised pattern in its evolution from a traditional sport to a sports-based entertainment. It consistently adapted in response to changes in the nature of its consumption and the commercial interests of promoters and owners of venues. In particular it constituted a relatively early British example of the 'Americanisation' of sport through its techniques of promotion and presentation. All spectator sports are to some degree a performance and when such sports are commercialised and played by professionals, economic demands compete with sporting values and ethics [89]. This is clearly evident in all-in wrestling in which, more than most other sports, offers an extreme example of the tensions between commercialisation and sport and of the capacity of spectators to continue to believe in a sport as such when the evidence suggests that what is on display meets few of the criteria by which any activity is deemed to be a sport. While many elements of all-in wrestling seem to be a negation of such values, this is arguably relative rather than absolute.

All-in wrestling's combination of sport and dramatic spectacle raises questions concerning the meaning of sport but also suggests that the subjectivity of spectators needs to be given serious consideration in determining what may or may not be considered a sport. The mimetic identification of spectators with wrestlers, as encountered at the Worktown Stadium, was categorically little different to that found in other spectator sports and as in all such sports required a suspension of disbelief [90]. At its most extreme this led to a point at which the audience accepted the likelihood of fakery but was prepared to overlook it [91]. In part this acceptance was a collective act as membership of the crowd and participation in the production of the entertainment were vital elements of the spectator's experience. As identified by Kennedy [92] this included the freedom to negotiate a relationship to other unknown spectators, the freedom to condemn the performance's outcomes and reject the manner of play, and the freedom to alter or vary the purpose of their presence. The supposed passivity of spectator sport appears to have been a theoretical construct rather than an empirical fact [93]. Henri Lefebvre [94] described leisure spaces as having the appearance only of the productive capacity of life. Leisure, he claimed, had been transformed into a neo-capitalist industry and was as alienating as labour. The evidence of the all-in wrestling in Worktown seems to suggest something different. Far from being under the control of the established order, having an emphasis on private life and being subject to hegemonic constraints, the all-in wrestling stadium was a space of agency, a public rather than private sphere in which spectator sport, subverted sporting values and transgressive behaviours flourished with minimal evidence of constraint by a bourgeois hegemony.

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